

Selected Arguments of Antifederalists (1780s)

The Antifederalists were persons who opposed the ratification of the U.S. Constitution in 1787-1788. They conceded that the central government needed more power than it had under the Articles of Confederation, but they argued that the Framers of the Constitution had gone too far, and, deeply suspicious of political power, feared that the centralized government proposed by the Framers would lead to a new kind of tyranny. As you read, look for the main arguments that these Antifederalists put forth against the proposed Constitution.

Melancton Smith, "Representation in Government"

[W]hen we speak of representatives... they resemble those they represent. They should be a true picture of the people, possess a knowledge of their circumstances and their wants, sympathize in all their distresses, and be disposed to seek their true interests. The knowledge necessary for the representative of a free people not only comprehends extensive political and commercial information, such as is acquired by men of refined education, who have leisure to attain to high degrees of improvement, but it should also comprehend that kind of acquaintance with the common concerns and occupations of the people, which men of the middling class of life are, in general, more competent to than those of a superior class. To understand the true commercial interests of a country not only requires just ideas of the general commerce of the world, but also, and principally, a knowledge of the productions of your own country, and their value, what your soil is capable of producing, the nature of your manufactures, the capacity of the country to increase both. To exercise the power of laying taxes, duties, exercises, with discretion, requires something more than an acquaintance with the abstruse parts of the system of finance. It calls for a knowledge of the circumstances and ability of the people in general - a discernment how the burdens imposed will bear upon the different classes.

... The number of representatives should be so large, as that, while it embraces the men of the first class, it should admit those of the middling class of life. I am convinced that this government is so constituted that the representatives will generally be composed of the first class in the community,

which I shall distinguish by the name of the natural aristocracy of the country...

From these remarks, it appears that the government will fall into the hands of the few and the great. This will be a government of oppression.

...A system of corruption is known to be the system of government in Europe...[and] it will be attempted among us. The most effectual as well as natural security against this is a strong democratic branch in the legislature, frequently chosen, including in it a number of the substantial, sensible, yeomanry of the country. Does the House of Representatives answer this description? I confess, to me they hardly wear the complexion of a democratic branch; they appear the mere shadow of representation.

George Clinton, "In Opposition to Destruction of States' Rights"

The... premises on which the new form of government is erected, declares a consolidation or union of all thirteen parts, or states, into one great whole, under the firm of the United States... But whoever seriously considers the immense extent of territory comprehended within the limits of the United States, together with the variety of its climates, productions, and commerce, the difference of extent, and number of inhabitants in all; the dissimilitude of interests, morals, and politics in almost every one, will receive it as an intuitive truth, that a consolidated republican form of government therein, can

never form a perfect union, establish justice, insure domestic tranquillity, promote the general welfare, and secure the blessings of liberty to you and your posterity, for to these objects it must be directed: this unkindred legislature therefore, composed of interests opposite and dissimilar in nature, will in its exercise, emphatically be like a house divided against itself...

From this picture, what can you promise yourself, on the score of consolidation of the United States into one government? Impracticability in the just exercise of it, your freedom insecure... you risk much, by indispensably placing trusts of the greatest magnitude, into the hands of individuals whose ambition for power, and aggrandizement, will oppress and grind you - where from the vast extent of your territory, and the complication of interests, the science of government will become intricate and perplexed, and too mysterious for you to understand and observe; and by which you are to be conducted into a monarchy, either limited or despotic...

Patrick Henry, "Need for a Bill of Rights"

This proposal of altering our federal government is of a most alarming nature!.... You ought to be watchful, jealous of your liberty; for, instead of securing your rights, you may lose them forever... I beg gentlemen to consider that a wrong step made now will plunge us into misery, and our republic will be lost, and tyranny must and will arise...

The necessity of a Bill of Rights appears to me to be greater in this government than ever it was in any government before... All rights not expressly and unequivocally reserved to the people are impliedly and incidentally relinquished to rulers, as necessarily inseparable from the delegated powers...

This is the question. If you intend to reserve your unalienable rights, you must have the most express stipulation; for, if implication be allowed, you are ousted of those rights. If the people do not think it necessary to reserve them, they will be supposed to be given up.

[W]ithout a Bill of Rights, you will exhibit the most absurd thing to mankind that ever the world saw - a government [i.e. state governments] that has abandoned all its powers - the powers of taxation, the sword, and the purse. You have disposed of them to Congress, without a Bill of Rights - without check, limitation, or control... You have Bill of Rights to defend against a state government, which is bereaved of all its power, and yet you have none against Congress, thought in full and exclusive possession of all power!